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OCCUR

OAKLAND CITIZENS' COMMITTEE FOR URBAN RENEWAL

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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OCCUR: A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOBBY

They act as a lobby, but have neither the money nor the inclination to wine and dine politicians. They do their work not in smoked-filled back rooms, but on the floor of the City Council chambers. When they meet their sponsors, it's usually in a public school auditorium where neighbors get together and talk about community problems, sketching out proposals to solve them.

They are a lobby for citizens. The non-profit group is called Oakland Citizens' Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR), a loosely-knit, grass roots organization of over 500 members founded 21 years ago. Its chief job is finding out what Oakland citizens want from their government and then effectively transmitting that information to the City Council.

Funded by donations from the City, a federal grant, and contributions from business, OCCUR is run by a small staff of five full-time employees, several trainees, and scores of volunteers.

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OCCUR stays out of partisan politics and attempts to give the City Council objective recommendations and proposals aimed at upgrading living and working conditions throughout the city.

Oakland Mayor John Reading applauds OCCUR's activities, saying that the organization "has made a major contribution to the better understanding on the part of our citizens about government in Oakland."


The group first gained influence in municipal affairs as an advisory board when the City Council in 1970 designated OCCUR as Oakland's official citizens' participation organization, thereby making the City eligible for a host of federally-funded projects that require local citizen input.

Since then, OCCUR has successfully pushed for City legislation concerning inadequate housing, affirmative action hiring for minorities and women, urban beautification, business development, and housing discrimination.

A current example of the group in action involves Oakland's block grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) of \$12.7 million, earmarked for improving living conditions for low- and moderate-income persons. The funding, which goes into effect next July, is part of a \$60 million comprehensive package for Oakland spread out over the next six years, replacing similar programs such as Model Cities and urban renewal.

Active citizen participation in deciding how and where the money gets spent is a major requirement before receiving the federal grant. The City Council chose OCCUR to carry out the task of getting citizens involved in that decision.

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Starting in early December, OCCUR sponsored eleven community meetings throughout Oakland to determine the needs of each neighborhood district. Over 700 concerned residents met and talked about specific needs in their communities, ranging from more suitable housing to removing barriers to the handicapped and elderly. In addition, OCCUR mailed a City-wide survey to Oakland citizens, asking how the HUD funds might be best used to solve neighborhood problems.

OCCUR gathered all this information, compiled an extensive list of citizens' needs in each district, and presented a report to the City Council last month.

The Council, deciding there was not sufficient time to respond to all citizens' requests because of HUD deadlines, approved a flexible application for the Federal grant on February 27. It did agree, though, to hear and respond to specific requests by July 1. Until then, OCCUR plans to work with citizens and community groups in presenting proposals to the City Council for funding.

Grass roots is what OCCUR is all about. Anyone who lives or works in Oakland can join. Membership is free.

The group strives to represent all of Oakland's varied interests. OCCUR's Board of Directors, for example, is made up of two representatives from each of the City's seven Councilmanic districts and seven at large members. Board members are elected annually by OCCUR's membership.

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It's an unusual Board. With 21 seats, nine directors are black, seven are white, four are Chicano, and one is Asian. Women make up a third of the Board. The bulk of the Board is composed of low- and middle-income residents. The only Oakland citizens not allowed to run for Board positions are public officials.

OCCUR has not always been so representative of all of Oakland's citizens. Started in 1954, OCCUR was an influential, civic organization run primarily by Oakland businessmen who discussed issues such as downtown urban renewal. Membership on the select blue-ribbon committee included representatives from major business concerns, local clergy, and several civic leaders.

OCCUR operated this way for more than a decade until 1969 when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) directed the City to make the group more representative of Oakland's changing population, or face losing all federal monies coming from HUD.

A lot happened quickly. The federal action opened OCCUR's membership to all citizens of Oakland. In 1971, OCCUR hired its first executive director, and opened a permanent office in the Broadway Building. OCCUR drafted housing and urban renewal studies, and presented its findings to the City Council. The group played a major role in the Council's decision to adopt a broad policy plan, Options for Oakland, aimed at coping with the City's economic and social ills. OCCUR also pushed for a strong affirmative action hiring program in the budding City Center project and for the City's Civil Service employees.

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OCCUR's successes continued to snowball. By 1972, construction of the Grove-Shafter Freeway, connecting Contra-Costa County with downtown Oakland, had displaced over 300 West Oakland families. The State Division of Highways claimed that suitable housing for the families was available elsewhere in the City. Several West Oakland neighborhood groups and OCCUR disagreed, and the case was taken to court. Currently the suit is pending before the U.S. District Court while the State and citizens' groups attempt to resolve the issue of replacement housing.

Right now OCCUR is actively engaged in recommending that the City Council adopt two programs that, OCCUR thinks, will enhance citizen input in local government: Community Development Districts and Fair Share allocation.

Supported by several citizens' organizations, OCCUR proposed to the City Council that Community Development Districts be set up throughout the City and officially recognized as effective advisory boards. Each District would determine its own needs and recommend projects and programs to the City for funding consideration. The Fair Share allocation program is needed, OCCUR suggests, to insure that a reasonable portion of federal funds be spent on the problems of each District. Of course, the Council has the ultimate responsibility to decide where the funds go.

Something else OCCUR is suggesting to the City Council is for Councilmen to participate in their District at Community District meetings so they can learn first-hand what problems affect each neighborhood. This way more citizens will have access to their elected city representatives, and in turn, the council members will get a better understanding of the needs in their districts.

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OCCUR's Board President, Lonnie Dillard, a long-time leader in Oakland civic affairs, says he hopes the group can attract more interest and support.

"We're here to help both the citizen and his elected representatives learn more about each other, " Dillard says. "We act as an intermediary between the two. We both want the same thing, and that is a better place to live and work, a better Oakland. We are united in our desire to achieve that goal. "

Interested citizens can contact Dillard at the OCCUR office, 1419 Broadway, Room 811, Oakland 94612. The group's phone number is 839-2440.

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